

Book Review

***The Terror That Comes in the Night: An Experience-Centered Study of Supernatural Assault Traditions*, David J. Hufford. 1982. Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press.**

A negative and condescending research question like “why and how do some people manage to believe things which are so patently false?” has dominated American belief scholarship (Hufford 1982: 47). Belief study in the American academia has been entrenched in traditions of disbelief, which are analytical perspectives that primarily aim at exposing and expounding sources of error that perpetuate “groundless” beliefs. One of the rationalizing schemes prevalent among debunkers and skeptical scholars is the claim that the belief in question is totally void of experiential referents. Or in a few cases in which such referents are involved, they were misconceived or misinterpreted by the credulous folk whose weak logical faculty renders them susceptible to superstitions. David Hufford’s *The Terror that Comes in the Night* challenges this simplistic assumption.

The book describes and analyses a distinct class of sensory experience known in Newfoundland, Canada as Old Hag. The experience features four primary components that are 1) an impression of wakefulness prior to or after drifting off to sleep 2) paralysis 3) an accurate perception of actual environment and 4)

fear. These primary features of the experience were reported by all informants who participated in Hufford’s study, regardless of their knowledge or ignorance of supernatural belief traditions surrounding this peculiar experience. In light of this finding, Hufford questions the cultural source hypothesis concerning the origin of supernatural beliefs. The theory posits that supernatural beliefs are products of a cultural lens. People who have been constantly exposed to supernatural traditions viable within their cultures have a tendency to mistake their imagination of otherworldly agents for reality, or to falsely attribute ordinary experiences to supernatural causes. The consistent sensory pattern of the Old Hag experience, reported by informants with different degrees of exposure to cultural notions respecting the incident, forms the basis for a different approach to supernatural beliefs. Hufford suggests that in several cases, *supernatural beliefs are based on a properly perceived and rationally interpreted experience* whose cause and nature have not yet been satisfactorily clarified by modern science.

This idea is the foundation of the experience-centered approach, which inquires into empirical experiences that constitute supernatural beliefs. Unlike the cultural source hypothesis that has a condescending implication about people who hold supernatural beliefs, the experience-centered approach focuses on the quality of experiences that warrant these beliefs. The theory seriously considers the possibility that the claim of having encountered mystical beings or witnessed numinous incidents made by

people from different cultures may have a basis in inscrutable experiences that attract supernatural interpretations. Secondary features of the Old Hag experience ratify this conjecture. Two experiential components described by the majority of informants are a feeling of pressure on the chest and a sense of presence within the room. These components, testified by individuals who are familiar with as well as those ignorant of beliefs concerning malicious spirits that attack sleeping humans, constitute the numinous quality of the experience. Given these persistent attributes commonly perceived by people who have different ideas and understandings of supernatural assault traditions, suffice it to say that mystical theories surrounding the Old Hag experience are not products of individual fancy influenced by culture. Rather, they are reactions to an empirical, baffling experience that demands an explanation. Hufford's experience-centered approach proposes a different way to imagine the relationship between belief and experience. Several beliefs are caused by somatic experiences whose inscrutable aspects are agreed upon by witnesses in spite of their diverse stances on the reality of the supernatural world. A crucial contribution of *The Terror That Comes in the Night* to the modern-day academia lies in its application of a new analytical approach to supernatural beliefs. With the advent of an alternative path, belief scholars do not have to pursue a derogatory research question that presupposes errors and false logic assumed to underpin all supernatural beliefs. They can instead inquire into empirical and logical components of these "superstitions" by asking a different

question: What renders these beliefs logical and meaningful for those who hold them?

Reference

Hufford, David J. 1982. "Traditions of Disbelief." *New York Folklore* 8 (3-4): 47-56.

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